DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 362 877 CS 214 063

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TITLE Nineteenth-Century American and British Poets on Columbus: A Twentieth-Century View.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Characterization; Comparative Analysis; Cultural Context; English Literature; *Nineteenth Century Literature; *Poetry; Reader Text Relationship; *Twentieth Century Literature; United States Literature; *World History
IDENTIFIERS *Columbus (Christopher); Nineteenth Century; Twentieth Century

ABSTRACT

In the 19th century alone, Christopher Columbus was the subject of hundreds of poems that rarely questioned his voyage, his methods, or his place in human history. However, the scholarly work and political realities of the 20th century have undermined the noble, heroic visions conveyed by the poets. Modern readers/students have a dual duty to understand the context in which the early writers lived and worked, and to interpret their work in a contemporary perspective. Nineteenth-century Anglo-Americans saw exploration and conquest as economic necessities, psychological challenges, and spiritual missions. The mood in both Great Britain and the United Sates was nationalist and expansionist. Furthermore, there was faith in the power of poetry and of the poet-as-hero to transform human lives. The poets shared a point of view of Columbus as a mythic figure, an introspective man, a man of destiny whose voyages were inspired by God. Where the poems varied was in their style of presentation. James Russell Lowell's poem "Columbus" resonates with memorable lines, but his blank verse falters with inappropriate diction and a Latinate vocabulary. The image and rhythm of Walt Whitman's "Prayer of Columbus" are the mark of a poet with a better ear than Lowell's. Joaquin Miller's poem "Columbus," with its famous moral, "Oh! Sail on!", suggest that all goals are praiseworthy, regardless of consequence--a view difficult to support in human history. Tennyson's poem "Columbus" ranks as a poem superior to that of the American poets. His Columbus expressed an alienation and loneliness that 20th century readers share. Contains 12 references. (RS)

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In the nineteenth century alone, Christopher Columbus was the subject of "more than several hundred poems written in English" (Sale 346), including works by such well-known writers as James Russell Lowell, Walt Whitman, Joaquin Miller, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. One hundred years ago, poets--as well as most citizens of England and America--rarely questioned the voyage of Columbus, his journey, his methods, his vision, or his place in human history. In the twentieth century, however, scholarly work and political realities have served to undermine the noble and heroic visions conveyed by the influential poets. Now in these final days of our century, having debated and studied the controversial record of the European contact with the Americas, we who read these same American and British poets face a dual duty: to understand the original context in which these writers lived and worked, and to interpret their work in light of our own perspective. The wholesale acceptance of conquest and exploration, so characteristic of the thinking of the last century, no longer suffices. Whether we respect Columbus, despise his voyage, or view it with ambivalence, we recognize that these nineteenth-century poems, written for a more self-confident, even naive age and for a European-American audience,

must be evaluated through a somewhat different, less enthusiastic, and more clouded viewpoint in our own day.

An examination of three characteristics of nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture may illuminate our analysis of the Columbus poems. First, it is well-known that nineteenth-century Americans and Europeans saw exploration and conquest as economic necessities, psychological challenges, and spiritual missions. While the British were making sure that the sun did not set on their empire, American settlers were relentlessly moving westward, building towns and cities, cultivating land, and celebrating their nationalism. That nationalism was furthered by the literature of the time, including a work which provided inspiration and material for the poets, Washington Irving's The Life and Voyages of Columbus, published in 1828. In the view of Kirkpatrick Sale, Irving makes of his Columbus "an extremely compelling and fascinating character, an outsized protagonist for an outsized story" (343). Washington Irving's Columbus combines "the practical and the poetical," his "conduct. . .characterized by the grandeur of his views and the magnanimity of his spirit" (Irving 191-3). Blaming the Mariner's sailors for inciting the natives, Irving ascribes to Columbus himself "benignity," piety, and imagination (194-7), faulting him, however, for the enslavement of the Indians; even here Irving concludes that Columbus was "goaded on" by the Spanish crown and by the "sneers of his enemies at the unprofitable result of his enterprises" (196). Cast as larger than life, as a genius, as grandiose and

visionary, Irving's Columbus became the source for much nineteenth-century thinking about the explorer.

In addition to the nationalist-expansionist spirit and the mythic character of Columbus, the nineteenth century believed in both the power of poetry and of the poet-as-hero to transform human lives. Critics and poets in both England and America exalted the role of the bard. Shelley thought poetry to be "the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds" (511). Because he (and I use the masculine pronoun deliberately) creates the record of those best moments, the poet "ought personally to be the happiest, the best, the wisest, and the most illustrious of men" (Shelley 512). In Shelley's view, the poet becomes a legislator of human events so that the public figure and the private poet merge into one heroic individual. Ralph Waldo Emerson goes a step further in his deification of the bard, terming poets "liberating gods" (552).

In James Russell Lowell's 1844 poem "Columbus," these motifs--expansion, mission, and the role of the poet--coalesce in the figure of the Mariner. Lowell, the noted New England poet, essayist and critic, preferred his "Columbus" to his poems about two other "heroic" figures, Prometheus and Cromwell, or so he wrote in a letter to C.F. Briggs (Letters 122-3). Lowell links the role of the explorer Columbus to the role and mission of the poet, a poet who is solitary, believing, and chosen by God. Unbelief is strong in the world, and "the dull fool's sneer" can daunt the hero. The "wicked and the weak" narrow his horizons.

If "the chosen soul" cannot be alone with God, he cannot do anything or think of anything great, because others drag him down: "The nurse of full-grown souls is solitude." Lowell's Columbus regards Europe as competitive, as obsessed with laying up earthly treasures: "The old world is effete." Columbus asks what the new world will bring; he clings to his hope, a hope that serves as his surrogate for love and fame, a hope that has in fact created his loneliness. Both in his boyhood and in later years, sea legends, Viking tales, and Dante all nurtured that hope:

> And I believed the poets; it is they
> Who utter wisdom from the central deep,
> And, listening to the inner flow of things,
> Speak to the age out of eternity. (161)

That person who is "the spirit select" by God cannot opt to avoid destiny; feeling the hand of God, the chosen one must do God's work.

Lowell's poem resonates with memorable lines and vivid imagery. Unfortunately, too often his blank verse falters with inappropriate diction and a Latinate vocabulary that can suffocate the poem's life; for example:

> And unto him it still is tremulous
> With palpitating haste and wet with tears,
> The key to him of hope and humanness,
> The coarse shell of life's pearl, Expectancy. (158)

The poem's themes convince the reader only if we ignore the

reality--or what we now perceive to be the reality--of Columbus. Lowell's hero is just that--a hero, a mythic figure, sure of his mission--distinct from the man many now perceive to be the historical Columbus, that man defined by such writers as Hans Koning as "a man greedy in large ways, and in small ways" (120). In contrast to Lowell's unquestioning acceptance of the validity of the voyage, we must wrestle with the view of such scholars as Edmundo O'Gorman, that the idea of America as "discoverable" is itself built on false "ontological and hermeneutical premises"; for O'Gorman, America was not discovered, but rather "invented" (45).

Literary theorist Wolfgang Iser has reminded us that any text leaves gaps which the reader must fill in. "For this reason," Iser asserts,

> one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. (380)

For this twentieth-century reader at least, the gaps in Lowell's verse are filled quickly by our own penchant for realism; by the conviction that human beings are fallible and complex, not mythic and one-dimensional; by the vivid images of Columbus' cruelty (a trait not found in Lowell but highlighted by twentieth-century scholarship) "when he set a dying monkey with

two paws cut off to fight a wild pig" and "when he set in motion what de las Casas called 'the beginning of the bloody trail of conquest across the Americas'" (Koning 120). For us, finally, the figure of the poet inhabits a more marginal place than for such nineteenth-century writers as Shelley, Emerson, or James Russell Lowell, so that to link Columbus with the role of the poet does little to ennoble him in twentieth-century eyes.

Walt Whitman's "Prayer of Columbus," first published in 1874 in Harper's Monthly, was reprinted in 1876 in Two Rivulets, with a prefatory paragraph:

> "It was near the close of his indomitable and pious life--on his last voyage . . . that Columbus. . . was taken very sick, had several relapses, his men revolted, and death seem'd daily imminent. . . See, the figure of the great Admiral, walking the beach, as a stage, in his sublimest tragedy--for what tragedy, what poem, so piteous and majestic as the real scene?--and hear him uttering--as his mystical and religious soul surely utter'd, the ideas following--perhaps, in their equivalents, the very words." (quoted in Allen and Davis 254-255)

Columbus speaks--in each of the poems considered here Columbus speaks in his own voice--and calls himself a "batter'd, wreck'd old man," asserting that he must once more, before he eats or rests, say his prayer. He must "report" himself to God, as if to give account or to justify his actions. Stating that he has kept

faith, he professes to have done God's work throughout his life; God has inspired him in all his work. At the same time, Whitman's Columbus often employs the first person and takes a certain amount of credit for his accomplishments:

> By me earth's elder cloy'd and stifled lands uncloy'd, unloos'd,
> By me the hemispheres rounded and tied, the unknown to the unknown.
> The end I know not, it is all in Thee. . . .
> (ll. 32-34)

Like Lowell's protagonist, Whitman's Columbus sees Europe as dead and lifeless; echoing the prophet Isaiah, he wishes that swords may be turned into "reaping-tools"; he hopes in addition that "Europe's dead cross, may bud and blossom" in the New World.

Columbus' physical weakness and spiritual malaise are transformed at the end of Whitman's poem by a vision:

> As if some miracle, some hand divine unseal'd my eyes,
> Shadowy vast shapes smile through the air and sky,
> And on the distant waves sail countless ships,
> And anthems in new tongues I hear saluting me."

Looking forward to the diversity of modern America, Columbus also indulges in an egocentric fantasy: immigrants will sing his praises.

The imagery and rhythm of these verses are the mark of a poet with a better ear than Lowell's. The diction, so characteristic of Whitman, retains a freshness and a modernity

lacking in Lowell. Philosophically, however, the poets share a similar point of view, the view of Columbus as a mythic figure, an introspective man, a man of destiny, a man whose voyages were inspired by God. The Columbus of both Lowell and Whitman maintains a certain egotism; he sees himself as set apart from common humanity. Yet, though Whitman does not question the settlement of the New World by Europeans, his poem pleases in a way that Lowell's does not, by the power of his language, by the dramatic power and intensity of his narrative, and by a characterization of Columbus as somewhat less self-indulgent than Lowell's messianic "chosen soul."

A discussion of nineteenth-century verse about Columbus written in English must include one of the best-known--if not the best--poems, Joaquin Miller's "Columbus," written for the 1892 commemoration of the 1492 voyage. Memorized by a few generations of American schoolchildren, with its repetitive refrain--"Sail on! Sail on!"--varied by more or fewer commands at the end of each stanza, the poem lends itself to recitation. The repetitive refrain dramatizes, in addition, the (supposedly) single-minded purpose of Columbus. When others doubt, when sailors turn pale at the churning waves and the blowing wind, Christopher Columbus alone retains sight of the goal. His persistence is of course rewarded, as dawn finally reveals the long-sought land. Joaquin Miller concludes his verses with a moral:

> He gained a world; he gave that world
> Its grandest lesson: 'On! Sail on!'

Oddly enough, Kirkpatrick Sale, whose recent book, The Conquest of Paradise, excoriates Columbus and his voyage, calls Joaquin Miller's work a "lovely Romantic poem" (613). Yet, with its doggerel rhythm and conventional imagery, the poem fails to delight the twentieth-century lover of poetry. Beyond that, the poem fails because in its simpleminded exhortation to "Sail on!" it punctuates for us its own moral bankruptcy: no attempt is made to question the goal. Miller's "Columbus" suggests that all goals are praiseworthy, regardless of consequences--a view difficult to support in human history.

We must look to a British poet for a more subtle, ambiguous look at Columbus and his voyage. For numerous reasons, Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem titled "Columbus" ranks as a poem superior to that of any of the American poets discussed in this paper. Tennyson's work, written in 1879-80, relies for its source on Washington Irving's Life of Columbus (1828). According to Irving, Columbus kept the chains he was bound by on his voyage back to Spain "'as relics and memorials of the reward of my services'" (Ricks 49). The image of those chains begins Tennyson's poem.

Tennyson's Columbus, like Lowell's, recites a dramatic monologue. Lowell's poem is an interior monologue; Columbus speaks to himself. In Tennyson's poem, however, he is talking to a courtier, a device that brings the reader into the poem--and into the room--as a surrogate listener. This Columbus remembers when the king and queen rose to greet him in Barcelona. All were

moved by his story; then the Te Deum was sung. He laments the "chains" given to the one prophesied in Revelation to bring a new heaven and a new earth. His chains contrast with the glory Columbus speaks of: he gave more glory to Spain than did all their wars; he "made West East." This Columbus alludes to his troubles, to the time he wasted trying to convince people of the value of his mission. He tells of waking up and thinking about his promise to use his wealth to liberate the tomb of Christ from the Moslems. He has enemies at court. In the bad times he heard God's voice telling him He would remain with Columbus. Still, this Mariner suffers; poor and without property, he sees "what a door for scoundrel scum" he opened "through which the lust,/Villainy, violence, avarice, of our Spain/Poured in on all those happy naked isles."

Whitman's Columbus prophesied a nation of happy diversity, and both Whitman and Lowell see the Old World as a land whose corruption vanishes in the New. Lowell describes the Old World as "effete," and Whitman refers to the "elder cloy'd and stifled lands" now made free by Columbus. Both poets imply that it is the land which is corrupt, and not the people; for Whitman and Lowell, the European settlers leave corruption on the shores of Europe and create a new and unblemished Eden in the New World.

Here we have a classic case of American naivete and optimism (Lowell, Whitman, and Miller) contrasted with European pessimism (Tennyson), or should we say realism, borne of centuries of burdensome history. That these American poets were descended

from Europeans cut off from Europe by only a generation or two implies a certain ironic twist: it took little time for European-Americans to slough off their decadence and regain their "innocence."

Tennyson, the man of Europe, also sees the New World as originally fresh and pure. This new Eden, however, has been corrupted by the Old Adam: the "scoundrel scum" have dirtied the purity of those "happy naked isles." For Tennyson, human beings take their human condition with them when they travel across the ocean.

Tennyson depicts Columbus as sensitive, humane, God-fearing. This Columbus knows the brutality that came to America after European contact:

> Their kindly native princes slain or slaved,
> Their wives and children Spanish concubines,
> Their innocent hospitalities quenched in blood,. . . .
>
> (ll. 170-173)

A double message is implied here. Columbus, the alien, blames the Spanish, but so of course does the Englishman--Tennyson--conditioned over the centuries to accept without question the Black Legend of Spanish conquest. Tennyson's English sensibility, his personal pessimism, and the alienation of the Victorian age in which he lived function as subtexts to "Columbus."

When the Columbus of the poem speaks of his impending death, he alludes once again to the chains he keeps with him. Someone

standing by his grave will ask what the chains mean. The answer:

'These same chains
Bound these same bones back through the Atlantic sea,
Which he unchained for all the world to come.'

Although Columbus wishes to embark on "one last voyage," to "lead/One last crusade against the Saracen, /And save the Holy Sepulchre from thrall," the courtier to whom the monologue is addressed seems not to want to listen to further Columbian oratory. Forming a telling parallel to the conquest of the Americas, this Admiral's desire for a crusade calls up for the latter-day reader more ambiguity, more images of bloodshed, and a greater conviction that, whatever we think of the glories of western culture, we lament at the same time its brutalities; we understand, or at least try to understand, its complexities and ambiguities. Like Tennyson, and perhaps, like the courtier, we too cannot wholeheartedly embrace the Mariner of legend.

Tennyson's Columbus ends his monologue lamenting his isolation: "I am but an alien and a Genovese." Like the conquered natives, like the Europeans transplanted to America, like the Italian sailor on a Spanish voyage, readers of the twentieth century share that alienation and that loneliness.

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